



DECISION MEMO

Pre-Commercial Thinning – North Fork

USDA Forest Service, Northern Region
Nez Perce – Clearwater National Forests
North Fork Ranger District
Clearwater County, Idaho



I. Background

I have decided to authorize the Pre-Commercial Thinning project located on the North Fork Ranger District in the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests, Clearwater County, Idaho. Legal descriptions (Boise Meridian) of the project area include (see attached maps):

- T40N, R7E, Sections 8 and 9
- T37N, R5E, Sections 7, 8, 16, 17, 20 and 21
- T37N, R6E, Sections 25 and 26
- T36N, R6E, Sections 8 and 12

II. Purpose and Need

The project proposes to thin trees in previously harvested stands (harvested in the last 15 to 25 years) which are overstocked with seedling and sapling sized conifer tree species. Stocking levels in these stands range from approximately 800 to over 4000 stems per acre. Less desirable species such as Douglas-fir, grand-fir and lodgepole pine produce cones and seeds at more regular intervals and at higher numbers than more desirable species like western larch, western white pine and ponderosa pine. High tree densities increase competition for available resources and reduce tree growth. The stands have a component of damaged, diseased, defective and suppressed trees which result in stands with overall poor health, vigor and structure.

The objective of the treatment is to reduce stand density to concentrate growth on more desirable trees. Removing the undesirable trees and retaining the dominant and codominant trees of the best quality is needed to improve the overall health, structure and vigor of the stands. In addition, thinning would shift the species composition of the target stands to a greater component of species such as western white pine, western larch and ponderosa pine which are more resistant to root disease and stem decay. Western larch and ponderosa pine are also more fire-tolerant. The project would also have the following benefits:

- Accelerate the diameter and height growth on the remaining selected trees in order to increase future timber yield potential and to accelerate successional development to the larger size classes.
- Improve the vigor of the remaining trees to make them more resistant to insect/disease attacks and less vulnerable to ice and snow damage, thereby promoting long-term forest health and resiliency.
- Maintain and promote shade intolerant species. Shade intolerant seral species generally tend to be more fire resistant and longer-lived than shade tolerant species.
- Increase the amount of sunlight reaching the ground and sustain the diversity of early seral vegetation species, including browse species important to big game, and to lengthen the time period that the forage would otherwise be available.

- Reduce the long-term fire hazard conditions in the stands to be treated and to the adjacent forest stands by:
 - Reducing the ladder fuel hazard and the potential fuel buildup from future stem exclusion tree mortality.
 - Creating a break in the continuity of standing dense ladder fuels across the landscape.

III. Decision

The Forest Service will thin trees on approximately 472 acres (25 stands; see Table below) in the North Fork Ranger District. The work would be completed primarily by contract crews under the oversight of Forest Service personnel. Some tree thinning will be completed by Forest Service personnel. All work will be done by hand using chainsaws; no mechanical timber harvesting equipment will be used.

Pre-Commercial Thinning – North Fork

Area	SUID No.	Acres	Township	Range	Section
1	010503A130800111	16	40N	7E	8
	010503A130800113	10	40N	7E	9
2	010501A180500014	26	37N	7E	7
	010501A180500033	8	37N	7E	8
	010501A180500031	10	37N	7E	8
	010501A160200005	12	37N	7E	16
	010501A180400090	12	37N	7E	16
	010501A180400003	9	37N	7E	16
	010501A180300001	35	37N	7E	16
	010501A180400071	15	37N	7E	17
	010501A180500035	3	37N	7E	17
	010501A180400075	34	37N	7E	17
	010501A180400034	23	37N	7E	17
	010501A180400016	13	37N	7E	20
	010501A180400040	4	37N	7E	20
	010501A180400017	32	37N	7E	20
	010501A180400012	27	37N	7E	20
	010501A180200005	37	37N	7E	20
	010501A180200006	40	37N	7E	20
	010501A180400072	17	37N	7E	20
	010501A180300010	5	37N	7E	21
3	010501A190600064	18	37N	6E	25
	010501A190500006	30	37N	6E	26
4	010501A190500045	13	36N	6E	12
5	010501A020200014	23	36N	6E	8
Total Acres		472			

The majority of the trees to be cut measure less than six inches in diameter. Trees will be felled and left in place and may be treated (cut into smaller lengths, de-limbed, etc.) so the slash will lay closer to the ground and break down faster. Spacing of the remaining trees, e.g. western white pine, western larch and ponderosa pine, will vary from stand to stand but will range from approximately 10 ft. x 10 ft. to 12 ft. x 12 ft. spacing.

Spacing and species retained will be determined by site conditions of each stand meeting the objectives of each prescription. Further mechanical slash treatment will not occur and no burning will be done in the stands after thinning.

Access to the treatment sites is on existing roads. Trees that fell across a Forest road or trail will be removed. The project will not change access restrictions.

BMPs for water quality and weed management will be followed. Additional Design Criteria include, but are not limited to:

- No roads or landings will be constructed.
- Other than hand held equipment such as power saws, the use of motorized equipment (such as All-Terrain Vehicles) will not be permitted off designated roads in the project areas.
- To help maintain or improve long-term levels of organic matter and nutrients felled trees will not be removed from the project areas.
- Storage of fuel or fueling of chainsaws will not be allowed in RHCAs.
- The Forest Culturist will work with the wildlife resource specialist to evaluate lynx and harlequin duck habitat overlap with the proposed thinning stands. Any restrictions or recommendations by the wildlife specialist will be followed.

IV. Rationale for Decision and Reasons for Categorically Excluding the Decision

A. Category of Exclusion and Rationale for Using the Category

Based on information in this document and the project record, I have determined that no extraordinary circumstances affecting resource conditions exist (36 CFR 220.6), that this project may be categorically excluded from documentation in an EA or EIS, and that it meets all the criteria outlined for 36 CFR 220.6(e)(6) *Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction.*

The rationale for my decision is based on: 1) the proposed action fully meeting the criteria for Categorical Exclusions, 2) the proposed action meeting the purpose and need, 3) the findings related to extraordinary circumstances, discussed below, 4) the project's consistency with laws and regulations, including the Forest Plans, 5) the on-the-ground review and discussion with District resource specialists, and 6) my review of the project record.

B. Finding of the Absence of Significant Adverse Effects to Extraordinary Circumstances

Based on the findings for resource conditions described below, I have determined that no extraordinary circumstances are associated with my decision. Forest Service direction at 36 CFR 220.6(b) describes the resource conditions that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstance related to the proposed action warrant further analysis and documentation in an EIS or EA.

Additionally, 36 CFR 220.6(b) states, "*The mere presence of one or more of these resource conditions does not preclude use of a categorical exclusion. It is the existence of a cause-effect relationship between a proposed action and the potential effect on these resource conditions and if such a relationship exists, the degree of the potential affects of a proposed action on these resource conditions that determines whether extraordinary circumstances exist.*"

1. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat or Forest Service sensitive species

The Forest Interdisciplinary (ID) Team Botanist, Fisheries Biologist and Wildlife Biologist have determined the project would have no significant effects to federally listed and R1 Sensitive species or their habitats. Therefore, no extraordinary circumstances were identified for these resources.

2. Floodplains, wetlands or municipal watersheds

The Forest Hydrologist determined no significant effects to floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds are expected for this project. The project is consistent with all applicable State and Federal water quality laws, and with soil and water standards in the Clearwater National Forest Plan, including the PACFISH amendment. Based on this analysis, no extraordinary circumstances were identified regarding floodplains, wetlands, and municipal watersheds.

3. Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas or national recreation areas

The project areas are not located in any congressionally designated areas; therefore, no extraordinary circumstances were identified to this resource.

4. Inventoried roadless or potential wilderness areas

The project is not within any Forest Plan or Idaho Roadless areas (36 CFR 294(c)) or potential wilderness areas; therefore, no extraordinary circumstances were identified.

5. Research Natural Areas

The project area does not include land designated as a Research Natural Area; therefore, no extraordinary circumstances were identified.

6. American Indian and Alaska native religious or cultural sites

The project has no potential to cause effects on native religious or cultural sites, assuming such properties were present; therefore, no extraordinary circumstances were identified.

7. Archaeological sites or historical properties or areas

The project has no potential to cause effects on historic properties, assuming such properties were present; therefore, no extraordinary circumstances were identified.

II. Interested and Affected Agencies, Organizations, and Persons Contacted

On March 27, 2018, the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests mailed letters to individuals, organizations, state and local agencies, and the Nez Perce and Coeur d'Alene tribes, providing information and seeking public comment. Project information was also available at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/nezperce> under NEPA projects. A legal notice appeared in the *Lewiston Tribune* on March 30, 2018, inviting comments for 14 days from publication. No responses were received regarding this project during the public comment period.

III. Findings Required by Other Laws

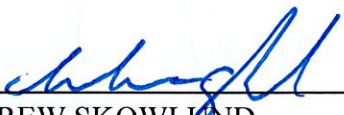
Based on my review of the actions associated with this project, I find that the Pre-Commercial Thinning Project is consistent with applicable Federal, state and local laws and regulations, including the standards

and guidelines contained in the 1987 Clearwater National Forest Plan, as amended, as required by the National Forest Management Act of 1976.

IV. Contact Person

Questions regarding this decision should be sent to Jeff Chynoweth, Small NEPA Team Coordinator, c/o Nez Perce-Clearwater NFs Supervisor's Office, 903 Third Street, Kamiah, Idaho 83536; 208-935-4260 or FAX 208-935-4275.

V. Signature of Deciding Officer



ANDREW SKOWLUND
North Fork District Ranger



Date

cc: Clare Brick

Enclosures (2): Maps of Proposed Project



Map 2 for the Pre-commercial Thinning – North Fork Project

